



## THE ARMENIAN COMMUNITY OF CONSTANTINOPLE IN THE LATE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

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This study utilizes a small sample of Armenian sources to explore the social and political characteristics of the Armenian community in Constantinople in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with particular attention to the structure of the community and its relations with the Armenian compatriots living in the provinces. The primary sources include 1) the first twenty-six issues of the Armenian periodical, *Jamanag (Zhamanak; Times)*, published between 1863 and 1869, initially as a biweekly and later as a monthly under the editorship of Stepan Boghos Papazian;<sup>1</sup> 2) the works of satirist Hagop Baronian (Hakob Paronian, 1842-1891), especially *Ptoyt me Polsoy tagherun mej* (A Stroll through the Neighborhoods of Constantinople) and *Metsapativ muratskanner* (The Honorable Beggars), which offer vivid descriptions of local customs and traditions in the 1870s;<sup>2</sup> 3) a collection of short stories written between 1909 and 1911 by Krikor Zohrab (Grigor Zohrap, 1861-1915);<sup>3</sup> 4) and the novel, *Amirayin aghjike: Polsakan gianki drvakner* (The Amira's Daughter:

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<sup>1</sup> Another newspaper of the same name has been published in Constantinople/Istanbul since 1908.

<sup>2</sup> Hakob Paronian, *Ptoyt me Polsoy tagherun mej* (Istanbul: Aramian Sanuts Miutian, 1962); *Metsapativ muratskanner* (Istanbul: Aramian Sanuts Miutian, 1961).

<sup>3</sup> Krikor Zohrab was a member of the Ottoman Parliament and one of the leading intellectuals in Ottoman society. As a lawyer, he contributed to the famous Dreyfus case in France by submitting a petition to the court. He authored many short stories and several novels in which he advanced his progressive ideas. He was murdered on the road from Aleppo to Diarbekir on orders of the Young Turk/Ittihadist government in 1915.

Episodes of Constantinopolitan Life), authored by journalist and teacher Erukhan (Ervand Srmakeshkhanlian, 1870-1915) and first published in 1904.<sup>4</sup> Although these sources offer no more than impressionistic glimpses into the Armenian community, as they are neither quantitatively nor qualitatively sufficient to provide "solid facts,"<sup>5</sup> they nonetheless shed some light on the contemporary community.

*The Armenian Constitution of 1863  
and Its Administrative System*

After the Reform Edict of 1856 during the so-called *Tanzimat* restructuring period in the Ottoman Empire (1839-76), each non-Muslim community was authorized to prepare a statute on the administration of its internal affairs. The document prepared by the Armenian community, which the Ottoman government accepted with modifications in 1863 under the title of Regulations (*Nizamname*), has since been referred to somewhat misleadingly as the "Armenian National Constitution" (*Sahmanadrutian*). It established a National Assembly consisting of 140 members, 20 of whom were to be clergymen elected by the clergy, 40 were to represent the Armenians of the interior provinces, while the remaining 80 were to be elected by the Armenians of Constantinople.<sup>6</sup> This Assembly was to elect the Armenian patriarchs of Constantinople and Jerusalem. It was to convene, except in emergencies, once every two years for two months to hear and examine reports concerning administrative affairs, supervise the budget, and elect members of the Religious Council and the Civic Council, which were to oversee the political and social affairs of the empire's Armenian community (*millet*). The Religious Council consisting of 14 clergymen was to manage the religious affairs of the Armenian Apostolic Church, while the Civic Council, consisting of 20 members was responsible for

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<sup>4</sup> Erukhan, *Amirayin aghjike: Polsakan gianki drvakner*, in *Erker* [Works] (Antelias: Catholicosate of Cilicia, 1993; first ed. 1904).

<sup>5</sup> For example, no sources from the period of the 1880s to 1900 are included in this overview.

<sup>6</sup> Here the inequality in representation is obvious since a few thousand people in the capital city were allowed to elect 80 deputies, whereas more than one million people in the provinces were represented by only 40 deputies.

“worldly” issues. In matters pertaining to both councils, a joint body could be constituted. The Civic Council conducted much of its affairs through a number of committees and subcommittees (educational, judicial, economic, monastic properties, financial, inheritance, and hospital administration). In sum, this statute created, at least on paper, quite a detailed bureaucracy with its specialized and hierarchical units.

*Organizational Unit of the Community:  
The Neighborhood*

In the cities of the Ottoman Empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, communities, including the Armenian community in Constantinople, were organized around the neighborhood as the smallest unit of communal organization. For the Armenians, the *tagh* (quarter or neighborhood), was a vital aspect of city life and defined their sense of belonging and identity. Although each neighborhood had its own unique characteristics, all of them maintained similar practices and organizational structures. Each neighborhood was governed by a council, whose members were elected by the male adult residents every four years and the number of whose members, according to the Constitution, ranged between five and twelve. In August 1863, for example, *Jamanag* reported the results of new elections for the twenty-six neighborhood councils.<sup>7</sup> According to proposed regulations prepared for the neighborhood council of Pera in 1861 and published in *Jamanag*, each council was to be responsible for several services, including maintaining the churches, cemetery, and schools within the *tagh*; caring for the poor; governing movable and immovable possessions and income; and settling disputes between Armenian residents. Additionally, the council was to serve as a mediator between the neighborhood residents and the Armenian Patriarchate. Although it is not clear whether this proposal was actually implemented for all of the councils in the capital, the descriptions in *Jamanag* of their various administrative functions provide insights with respect to their influence and public expectations in the

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<sup>7</sup> *Jamanag* [Zhamanak], no. 17 (Aug. 17, 1863), pp. 129-31.

Armenian neighborhoods.<sup>8</sup> In July 1863, the journal reported:

When we seek to understand why people of Ortakiugh<sup>9</sup> feel so much sympathy to their neighborhood council, we find that the council not only settled every dispute in the neighborhood peaceably but also was able to pay off the former debt of the neighborhood which is 70,000 *kurush*, and additionally the council is enthusiastically involved with the two neighborhood schools.<sup>10</sup>

The selection of committees, their policies, and their practices generated considerable political debate and tension. For instance, a committee responsible for care of the neighborhood poor was required to conduct a detailed survey concerning the financial situation of every family in order to determine whether one was "poor" and therefore eligible to receive assistance. In *Amirayin aghjike*, Erukhan describes such a committee member: "Because of his responsibility this man knows everybody living in the neighborhood and their material conditions; he even has some information about family secrets. From time to time, people request information from him about the moral and material conditions of a certain family. People come to him for information concerning a girl whom they wish to have as a bride."<sup>11</sup> Although seemingly invasive, in a sense such committee members may have contributed to the continuity and maintenance of order in the neighborhood.

At times, however, these committees and the neighborhood councils may have also contributed to instability. For example, in his *Ptoyt me Polsoy tagherun mej*, Hagop Baronian frequently refers to arguments or "fights" taking place within the councils or because of the councils, particularly during election time. In fact, although officially a member of council was elected for a four-year term, often he or the entire council would be forced out of office by their opponents only a few months after the

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<sup>8</sup> *Jamanag*, no. 24 (Nov. 24, 1863), pp. 190-91; no. 25 (Dec. 7, 1863), pp. 198-200; no. 26 (Dec. 21, 1863), pp. 206-07.

<sup>9</sup> Turkish: Ortaköy, meaning Middle Village, a neighborhood on the western shore of the Bosphorus.

<sup>10</sup> *Jamanag*, no. 15 (July 20, 1863), p. 114.

<sup>11</sup> Erukhan, *Amirayin aghjike*, pp. 241-42.

elections. Regarding the Karagumruk tagh, Baronian writes: "If a man is elected to the neighborhood council, he either resigns after six months or he carries his bed to the council of-fice."<sup>12</sup> Similarly, in the case of the Selamsiz tagh, he observes: "After the promulgation of the Constitution, there has not been any council that completed a full term in office."<sup>13</sup> The residents of Pera "are never happy with their council, so they are always skirmishing."<sup>14</sup> Networks of patronage further complicated local politics. During elections, for example, every businessman voted for his favorite customer and in return relied on his private ties with those in office to secure tangible material benefits from the council's decisions.<sup>15</sup>

Disputes and struggles for power occurred not only within the neighborhood but also between neighborhoods. A dispute between Karagumruk tagh and Balat tagh, both on the western side of the Golden Horn, entailed the matter of their unification into a single neighborhood. Karagumruk tagh wished to remain a separate neighborhood, whereas Balat hoped to bring Karagumruk under its jurisdiction. "Balat does not want to let its prey escape," reported *Jamanag*.<sup>16</sup> In the end, the quarrel was resolved by maintaining the two as separate neighborhoods.<sup>17</sup> This case implies that being a distinct neighborhood was advantageous and most probably revolved around the taxes collected from the residents by the neighborhood councils.<sup>18</sup>

Beyond providing local governance, neighborhood life also established moral norms for individuals and families. In this sense, the Armenian community with its emphasis on traditional values and customs was not so different from its Muslim neigh-

<sup>12</sup> Paronian, *Ptoyt me*, p. 283.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 302.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 330.

<sup>15</sup> Paronian, *Metsapativ muratskanner*, p. 79.

<sup>16</sup> *Jamanag*, no. 22 (Oct. 26, 1863), p. 175.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 26 (Dec. 21, 1863), p. 204.

<sup>18</sup> The national ("agzgayin") tax is covered in articles 90-93 of the 1863 Constitution. According to this regulation, every adult (that is, male adult) was obliged to contribute to "the expenses of the nation" by an annual tax. This tax was divided into two parts. The first was collected by the Patriarchate of Constantinople for the central expenses, while the second part was collected by the neighborhood councils to meet local expenses. Moreover, these councils were authorized to decide how the local tax would be levied and collected.

bors, as both refused to recognize the existence of an individual morality independent of the collective. Although it is usually believed that Armenians in the latter part of the Ottoman era were closer to European values and were more “modern” than Muslims, contemporary sources show that Armenians held unfavorable attitudes toward individual independence and moral standard vis-à-vis the community. For example, Krikor Zohrab, in his story “Deceased,” paints an unflattering picture of the residents of a conservative neighborhood who scorn a widow and her two daughters because of the absence of a male in charge of the family. Zohrab exposes the cruelty of the tagh by chronicling its obsession with respectability as it launches an inquisition into the background of the widow and her family.<sup>19</sup> Zohrab also describes a brother who refuses to marry before his two younger sisters because a traditional moral rule dictated that an older brother could not marry before his sisters had done so.<sup>20</sup>

Among the Armenians of Constantinople in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as in other communities of the empire, there was a tension between the traditional and the modern, between the values and way of life they represented. A speech, made in an awards ceremony at the Amenaprkich Varzharan (All Savior’s School) in the Galata neighborhood and published in *Jamanag*, reflected this tension. Mgrditch Hagopian, one of the students of the school, wrote that if Armenians hoped to develop as a nation, they would have to adopt Western technology and especially Western methods of education. Yet he also emphasized that Armenian values and Christianity should not be forgotten but be taught to the school children.<sup>21</sup> This was a familiar argument heard not only among Armenians but also Muslim Ottoman intellectuals in the nineteenth century—that on the way to modernity with Western methods it was essential to maintain a people’s own moral values. Preserving the moral norms and values of the Armenian community represented one of the most pressing issues for the neighborhood councils.

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<sup>19</sup> Krikor Zohrab, *Hekiatner* [Fables] (Istanbul: Agos, 1998), p. 55.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>21</sup> *Jamanag*, no. 17 (Aug. 17, 1863), p. 134.

### *Armenian Societies*

The Armenians of Constantinople created, besides the neighborhood councils, many organizations or clubs (Armenian: *miutun*) which brought together likeminded members of the community. Baronian's *Ptoyt me Polsoy tagherun mej* depicts a society in the Ortakiugh tagh, which taught various crafts to the unemployed youth, while another in the Balat tagh distributed money and various presents to the poor during the Christmas season and at Easter. A miutun in the Salmatomruk tagh sought to encourage reading among the residents and organized discussion sessions about literature. Similarly, an organization in the Selamsiz tagh aimed to contribute to the improvement of education and Armenian schools.<sup>22</sup>

*Jamanag* frequently announced the formation of such societies. For example, Varzhabedagan Engerutiun Hayots (The Armenian Teachers' Society) was established to standardize the methods of education in Armenian schools and to enhance the living standards of the teachers and their communities.<sup>23</sup> Another society, the Haygazian Engerutiun in Beshiktash published books to foster literacy among the Armenians.<sup>24</sup> In addition, Andznanver Engerutiun (Altruistic Society) taught reading and writing to Armenians who had migrated to Constantinople from the provinces to earn money.<sup>25</sup> In a similar vein, the graduates of the Samatia School founded a society to improve the quality of education at that same institution.<sup>26</sup> As long as this society and the neighborhood were united, *Jamanag* commented, the residents could work harmoniously together, demonstrating the extent to which societies could be influential among the Armenian people.

The Ergrakordzagan Engerutiun (Agricultural Society), established in Constantinople by migrants from the twin towns of Everek and Fenese in Gesaria (Kayseri) deserves special mention. The society purchased lands near Everek-Fenese to conduct

<sup>22</sup> Paronian, *Ptoyt me*, pp. 258, 280, 303, 334, 363.

<sup>23</sup> *Jamanag*, no. 1 (Jan. 2, 1863), pp. 3-4.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 7 (March 30, 1863), p. 54.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 13 (June 22, 1863), p. 103.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 15 (July 20, 1863), pp. 118-19.

agricultural experiments. The society focused on cash crops like silk and cotton. According to *Jamanag*, there were between 600 and 700 shareholders who paid 5 kurushes each to generate the capital needed for the enterprise. Although the principal motivation was not profit, the shareholders could receive their principal with dividends five years later. The society accumulated 150,000 kurushes and apparently distributed a part of that amount to its shareholders and reinvested the remainder in the project. Further, this society also provided a solidarity network among the migrants by creating a communication line with Everek-Fenese. In the 1860s, because of the primitive transportation infrastructure, normally months would pass before a letter reached its destination. As a service for the migrants and their families back home, the Ergrakordzagan Engerutian, through a special agreement with the public post office, collected and dispatched the letters securely and quickly to Everek-Fenese and received letters in return as expeditiously as possible. The society also collected letters from non-members and even from non-Armenians for a fee.<sup>27</sup>

These societies, along with the neighborhood councils, performed various social functions and strengthened the structural foundations of the Armenian communities in Constantinople. The Armenians of the capital were clearly organized and mobilized around specific projects such as philanthropy, education, and entrepreneurship.

### *Education of Armenian Girls*

If the level of women's education represents an indicator of the degree of a society's "modernity," then the Armenian community in Constantinople in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries appeared to be relatively advanced. Many Armenian parents decided to send their daughters to school. In his *Ptoyt me Polsoy tagherun mej*, Baronian often mentions the existence of separate schools for girls and, albeit rarely, coeducational schools. Each tagh usually operated separate schools for boys and girls. There was one school for girls (Hripsimiants Varzharran) in Ortakiugh, Salmatomruk, Eyup, Kadikoy, Topkapu (60

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<sup>27</sup> *Jamanag*, no. 19 (Sept. 14, 1863), pp. 150-51.



students), Balat (80 students), Yenikapu, and Ijadiye; two schools in Kumkapu (more than 100 students); and a coeducational school in Kinaliada.<sup>28</sup> Thus, in the 1870s there were at least eleven Armenian girls' schools in Constantinople for an estimated 500 students.

Despite the persistence of traditional values in the Armenian communities, these schools for girls played an important role in enhancing the influence of women in social circles in the Ottoman capital. In Ortakiugh, the Hripsimants Varzharan had been operating for three years in 1863. An anonymous correspondent in *Jamanag* praised the improvements shown during those three years.<sup>29</sup> In addition, the Nazarian School for girls in Yenikapu, with its primary (three year) and secondary (two year) divisions, was opened in February 1863.<sup>30</sup> According to its founder and principal, Toros Nazarian, the school aimed at improving intellectual skills and handicrafts of its girls.<sup>31</sup> *Jamanag* encouraged families to enroll their daughters in this school: "Send your daughters to school in exchange for a small sum; instead of buying luxurious clothing for them, contribute to the development of their hearts and minds."<sup>32</sup> The Nazarian School was a private institution that charged a tuition, but poor girls were admitted for 50 percent of the tuition if the neighborhood councils could confirm their financial status.<sup>33</sup>

The importance attached to the education of girls in the Constitution of 1863 is captured by the third clause of its introduction. It explicitly declares that the "nation is responsible to provide the necessary education for both boys and girls equally." Similarly, some literary works emphasized the significance of education for women for the advancement of the individual

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<sup>28</sup> Paronian, *Ptoyt me*, pp. 256, 265-66, 281, 286, 291, 308, 333, 338, 358, 370.

<sup>29</sup> *Jamanag*, no. 15 (July 20, 1863), p. 115.

<sup>30</sup> The school was divided into two sections: primary and secondary. The founder and principal of the school stated that it would accept girls of all ages. The primary level offered courses in reading, writing, religion, history, grammar, morality, mathematics, geography, French, painting, and sewing; the secondary level, in addition to the above courses, included literature, economics, and music. *Jamanag*, no. 6 (March 16, 1863), p. 47.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 5 (March 2, 1863), p. 40.

<sup>32</sup> "Tbrots Nazarian," in *Jamanag*, no. 6 (March 16, 1863), p. 46.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

and of society. For instance, Arshak, one of the protagonists in Erukhan's *Amirayin aghjike*, says to his lover: "I do not want you to be ignorant; on the contrary, you should be educated. All my books are at your disposal. I will do everything to make you an enlightened girl."<sup>34</sup>

*Constantinople Armenians Discussing  
Their "Brothers" in the Interior*

Armenians who had come to Constantinople from the interior provinces remained attached to their hometowns, and many Armenians in general showed a strong interest in events in the interior provinces. The social, economic, and political situation of their struggling compatriots emerged as one of the most urgent issues for Armenians in the capital. *Jamanag* is replete with news and complaints reported from various parts of the empire. Many Armenians directed their complaints to Constantinople in hopes of attracting the attention of the Armenian Patriarchate and the Constantinopolitan community in order to solve the problems and daily injustices. Comments appearing in *Jamanag* clearly indicated that the grievances could not be addressed effectively. For example, just before the first elections for the Armenian National Assembly in 1863, *Jamanag* wrote:

Regarding the extreme misery of the provincial villages and the incompetence of the administrative body in Constantinople, we would foresee an unfortunate future for our nation if we were not on the eve of the formation of a constitutional administration.<sup>35</sup>

Some of the major problems in the provinces involved the conversion of Armenians to Catholicism, deepening poverty, recurring Kurdish assaults on the Armenian villages, rampant corruption by officials, and unceasing exploitation of the Armenian peasantry. For instance, *Jamanag* reported that Armenians in Ovajigh (Chankiri) began to adopt Roman Catholicism

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<sup>34</sup> Erukhan, *Amirayin aghjike*, p. 192.

<sup>35</sup> "Verjin antskere" [The Latest Developments], in *Jamanag*, no. 17 (Aug. 17, 1863), p. 135.

because the Patriarchate of Constantinople failed to provide the care and attention required to solve their problems. The journal described this situation as a "moral fire."<sup>36</sup> There was the "danger" of Catholicism also in Zeitun, a region of social and political unrest because of frequent tension between the Armenians and the government. According to *Jamanag*, Catholic clergymen, "who have the habit of fishing in muddy waters," visited Zeitun and promised the Armenians to solve their problems if they converted to Catholicism.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, *Jamanag* announced in equally alarmist terms that in Bilejik (Urfa district) some 100 Armenians had already converted to Catholicism.<sup>38</sup>

News coming from the interior was not limited to conversions to Catholicism. *Jamanag*'s pages frequently reported on the murder and abduction of Armenians. For instance, letters from Van complained that "one of the important figures of the Armenian community in Van (M. Akribas) was killed on his way to Arshak village, but the criminals could not be caught."<sup>39</sup> On June 22, 1863, *Jamanag* published an article titled "Sad News from Mush," which relayed from the local *Taroni artzvik* (Eagle of Taron) newspaper that seven assaults had occurred against Armenians in different villages of Mush between April 21 and May 22. The victims were either killed or wounded and their properties seized. In most cases, the perpetrators, identified simply as "Kurds,"<sup>40</sup> were never apprehended or else were released after spending two or three days in prison. A petition presented to the Patriarch in Constantinople by a group of neighborhood councils indicated that other places in the interior—Kharpert (Harput), Palu, Marash—experienced similar crises. The petition stated that Armenians in the provinces, who constituted the majority of the Armenian nation, were in urgent need of a solution to the serious problems that grew worse day by day. Their only hope was the Patriarchate and their Armenian brothers in the capital. Such disturbing events created dis-

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<sup>36</sup> *Jamanag*, no. 5 (March 2, 1863), pp. 36-37.

<sup>37</sup> "Konstantinapolso mej mard gtnelu dzhvarutiune" [The Difficulties of Finding a Man in Constantinople], *Jamanag*, no. 21 (Oct. 12, 1863), p. 166.

<sup>38</sup> The details of this news are not given. *Jamanag*, no. 6 (March 16, 1863), p. 47.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 13 (June 22, 1863), p. 101.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, "Mushen tsavali lurur," p. 104.

content in those regions and within the Armenian community of Constantinople. Yet the petitioners apparently were also cognizant of the fact that many Armenians in Constantinople were not closely interested in their plight, as they warned that "if necessary solutions are not found, only the Armenian community of Bolis will be left as the sole remaining Lusavorchakan [Apostolic] one."<sup>41</sup>

The difficulties involved in addressing these problems notwithstanding, the Civil Council of the Armenian National Assembly created a special body, *kavaragan hantsnazhoghov* (Provincial Commission), to review the complaints and to seek means to address the problems. The commission, consisting of four members,<sup>42</sup> was expected to meet once a week to discuss the questions related to the situation in the interior and to prepare weekly reports to the Civic Council.<sup>43</sup> While further research is necessary to determine the extent of its activities, the commission submitted petitions to the Ottoman government to demand the dismissal of some state officials because of their poor treatment of Armenian peasants.<sup>44</sup> As some Armenians converted to Catholicism or Protestantism or fled to the Russian Empire, *Jamanag* urged the villagers affected by such crises to be patient and to discuss their cases with inspectors being sent by the central government to the provinces.<sup>45</sup>

As it happened, news about the deteriorating situation in the interior had a mixed reception among Constantinopolitan Armenians. Many were clearly concerned about their compatriots, while others showed little interest in such matters. In the final analysis, however, the Armenian community was unable to provide any real solutions.

### Conclusion

The Armenian community in the Ottoman capital in the late

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., no. 22 (Oct. 26, 1863), pp. 174-75.

<sup>42</sup> *Jamanag* gives the following names: Hagop Burunsuzian, Varteres Misakian, Harutiun Sarughanian, and Mardiros Muhendisian.

<sup>43</sup> *Jamanag*, no. 24 (Nov. 23, 1863), p. 189.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., no. 25 (Dec. 7, 1863), p. 195.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., no. 18 (Aug. 31, 1863), p. 141.

Ottoman Empire was organized around certain collective bodies such as the tagh/neighborhood councils and various societies that helped to maintain a functioning society and contributed to its well-being. This did not mean, however, that Armenians always worked harmoniously or efficiently. On the contrary, the institutions of stability at times became a source of dissension and conflict. Still, the Armenian neighborhood communities enjoyed a vibrant social existence and were active, for example, in matters pertaining to the education of girls and to the worsening conditions in the eastern provinces. Future studies would profit greatly by a closer examination of the relationship between the Armenians of Constantinople and the interior. While the picture presented here is far from complete, it may perhaps be regarded as a starting point.



Hagop Baronian